

Heritage Appraisal of Jamia Mosque, 30 Shelley Street, Central, Hong Kong

Historical Interest

Jamia Mosque (the “Mosque”) (回教清真禮拜總堂, also known as “些利街清真寺”) at 30 Shelley Street (些利街) was built in 1915 with the donation from Haji Mohamed Essack Elias, a Bombay merchant, to replace the old mosque on the same site. Completed in 1916, it is the oldest mosque in Hong Kong.¹

The Mosque is historically significant in witnessing the growth of the Muslim community in Hong Kong. Amid the wave of the global sea trade and the British’s administration of Hong Kong in the nineteenth century, Muslims who were mainly Indian merchants and sailors arrived in Hong Kong on the merchant ships of the East India Company. In addition, some Muslim Indian soldiers were deployed by the British to Hong Kong. There were also Indian Muslims who worked as policemen, prison guards, bank clerks, etc. in Hong Kong. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Upper Lascar Row and Lower Lascar Row were the major settlement areas of the Muslim community.² The Muslims held their first *Jamat* (assembly or religious congregation) outdoors at Lower Lascar Row and continued the practice for a period of time before a place for worship was built.

To cope with the needs of the growing Muslim community in the city, some Muslim firms from the Indian subcontinent with established businesses in Hong Kong applied to the Hong Kong Government for building a mosque. A piece of land (designated as Inland Lot No. 268 where the Mosque now stands) was leased in 1849 to four Muslims namely Shaik Moosdeen, Mahomed Arab, Shaik Carther and Hassan Malay, who acted as the trustees of the Mussulman community of Hong Kong, at a nominal rent for 999 years for the construction of a mosque.³ They were prominent Indian

¹ Reports of the Director of Public Works for the years 1915 and 1916 record that the construction of Jamia Mosque commenced in 1915 and completed in 1916.

² Lascar refers to sailors from India or Southeast Asia. The street name of Upper Lascar Row and Lower Lascar were probably named after the major settlement there.

³ The Land Registry, ‘Lot No.: Inland Lot No. 268’, Government Lease of IL 268 trustees of *Mussulman* community of Hong Kong for a mosque.

Muslims involved in sea trade or closely connected with the British army. The first *masjid* (the Arabic word of “mosque”) was completed in 1849 by contributions from a handful of worshippers. It was a small stone house that could accommodate around 150 people. The indenture for the land lease was entered into between the trustees and the Government on 23 September 1850.

The first Mosque soon became insufficient to cater for the rapid growth of the Muslim community in Hong Kong. It was demolished in 1915 and replaced by the present one. The foundation stone embedded in the front façade of the Mosque was laid on 15 August 1915. The new Mosque could accommodate a congregation of around 400 people. The Mosque is now managed by the Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong, and remains as an important place of worship and gathering for the Muslim community in Hong Kong.

As shown on the foundation stone of the Mosque, the architect was Abdoolhoosen Abdoolrahim. He built the Mosque on a sloped site in the Mid-levels accessible through an archway with a flight of stairs on Shelley Street. The Mosque has an elongated rectangular plan constructed along an east-west axis with the *Qibla* wall facing the Holy Kaaba in Makkah, Saudi Arabia which is the birth place of Holy Prophet Muhammad, and the entrance portico in the east crowned with a minaret for calling worshippers to perform their daily prayers in the past.⁴

***Architectural
Merit***

The Mosque is constructed in concrete and bricks. The granite columns at the front façade of the Mosque support the minaret. A metal spiral staircase at the corner of the entrance portico gives access to the octagonal encircling balcony of the minaret above and the connecting bridge to the roof of the prayer hall. The entrance portico laid with marble floor tiles is a small courtyard enclosed with low fence wall covered by a canopy and a later-added corrugated roof. It is the space to demarcate pure and impure areas. Muslim worshippers and visitors must take off their shoes upon entering

⁴ The original function of the minaret is no longer needed as loudspeaker is now installed inside the Mosque. *Imam* uses microphone during prayers nowadays.

the entrance portico. Three entrance doors open to the interior of the prayer hall which is a large single space with the *Qibla* wall at the other end. The ablution (*wudu*) area of the Mosque for worshippers to wash their hands, face, elbows, heads, feet and ankles before entering the Mosque for praying is next to *Musafir Khana* (i.e. the residence of the Muslims), detached from the Mosque.

Rich Islamic mosque architectural features can be seen at the Mosque. The minaret is crowned by a dome with finial. The archways of the entrance portico and the three entrance doorways leading to the prayer hall are pointed multifoil archways. The windows and openings on the side elevations and the minaret are also decorated with pointed arches, with window leaves fitted with pointed multifoil coloured glazing. An octagonal dome is located at the centre of the prayer hall. Octagonal coloured glass windows are applied at the drum of the dome. The *mihrab* on the *Qibla* wall, which is a niche with a pointed onion arch opening flanked by a smaller similar niche of same shape on each side, is the most decorated part inside the Mosque. The *mihrab* also serves as a natural amplifier. The *Imam* who leads prayers at the mosque will face the *mihrab* during prayers and his voice will be bounced back to the worshippers behind him. A century-old wooden *mimber* is placed by the side of the *mihrab*.⁵ *Kufic* calligraphic motifs are found throughout the Mosque mainly above doors, windows, niches, and at the centre of each window at the drum of the central dome. The low fence wall of the small court and the roof parapets are decorated by rounded merlons, and pedestals crowned by finial at intervals. The four corner spires on the roof of prayer hall are also crowned with finial as well. Crescent and star are placed at the top of the minaret.

⁵ A *mimber* is a stepped pulpit to the right of the *mihrab* in a prayer hall of a mosque, where an *Imam* delivers *khutbah* (talk on religious and moral subjects) during the Friday prayers. It is usually constructed with an odd number of steps, where a three-step design is considered as a rather modest design (there are examples with 9 to 11 steps). Built-in *mimbers* are usually permanent stone structures, while non-structural *mimbers* are usually made of wood, as is the case at Jamia Mosque. According to the inscriptions on the *mimber* of Jamia Mosque, it was presented by a local Chinese Muslim, Mr MA Chik Ting in 1915.

The Mosque retains much of its authentic appearance since it was built in 1915. A more obvious alteration is the covering of the small courtyard at the entrance portico with corrugated sheets. This later addition, however, can be removed completely if necessary without affecting the integrity of the structure and the design of the Mosque. The exterior of the Mosque is painted light green and white at present. It was painted in various colours in the past, like carmine in the early days, white in the 1990s and pale green and darker green as shown in some old photos. The Mosque has been performing its original function since it was built, which further enhances its authenticity and history. **Authenticity**

The Mosque is a rare type of architecture in Hong Kong and is the oldest mosque as well as one of the only two pre-war mosques in the territory.⁶ Among all the Islamic mosque architectural features embodied in the Mosque, the minaret is rare in Hong Kong. **Rarity**

The Mosque embodies the fulfilment of the spiritual needs of the Muslim community in Hong Kong. Before the construction of the Kowloon *Masjid* (Kowloon Mosque) in Tsim Sha Tsui and the *Masjid* Ammar in Wan Chai, it was the crucial worshipping and gathering venue for local Muslims. Prayers are held five times daily at the Mosque and there is a large congregation on Fridays.⁷ Mosque Street (摩羅廟街) and Mosque Junction (摩羅廟交加街), which are located in the vicinity of the Mosque, are obviously named after it. The Mosque has been an iconic architecture in the neighbourhood and is also on the Sheung Wan Route of the Central and Western Heritage Trail, serving as a landmark testifying the development of the Muslim community in Hong Kong. It is just a few steps away from the Central to Mid-Levels Escalator and Walkway System and has been attracting visitors and tourists to it. **Social Value & Local Interest**

The Mosque has a strong historical and social connection with the Residence of Muslims at Jamia Mosque (清真寺教徒住所) (Grade 2) nearby. The Mosque and other remarkable religious **Group Value**

⁶ Stanley *Masjid* was built in 1937.

⁷ Muslims pray five times a day, i.e. *Fajr* or early morning prayer, *Zuhr* or noon prayer, *Asr* or afternoon prayer, *Maghrib* or sunset prayer and *Isha* or evening prayer.

buildings in the vicinity, including Sacred Heart Chapel (聖心教堂), Hong Kong Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (香港天主教聖母無原罪主教座堂) and Ohel Leah Synagogue (猶太教莉亞堂) (all Grade 1), demonstrate the cultural and religious diversity of Hong Kong. Besides, there are also declared monuments and other graded historic buildings in the neighbourhood of the Mosque, including No. 15 Robinson Road (羅便臣道15號) (Grade 2), Steps of Prince's Terrace (太子台台階) (Grade 3), No. 20 Hollywood Road (荷李活道20號) (Grade 3), Tai Kwun, consisting of three groups of declared monuments (former Central Police Station Compound (前中區警署), former Central Magistracy (前中央裁判署) and former Victoria Prison Compound (前域多利監獄); and Kom Tong Hall (甘棠第) (Declared Monument). These buildings depict the historical and socio-cultural development of Hong Kong.